

The Seattle Times

seattletimes.com

Saturday, January 19, 2008 - Page updated at 03:12 PM

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The information in this article, originally published January 18, 2008, was corrected January 19, 2008. In February 2007, Seattle City Councilmember Nick Licata told Sports Illustrated the economic impact of the Sonics. A previous version of this story incorrectly reported that Councilmember Licata's Sports Illustrated interview occurred in February 2006. **Sonics: City wouldn't miss us**

By Jim Brunner*Seattle Times staff reporter*

If the Sonics leave Seattle, the city's economy won't suffer and most people won't care.

That's not the tirade of some anti-arena activist; it's the Sonics' latest legal argument to try to get out of its KeyArena lease.

And it's exactly the opposite of what the Sonics have claimed when asking for taxpayer help to build a new arena.

The team made the argument in papers filed in U.S. District Court this week, seeking mediation or a speedy trial to allow the team to abandon city-owned KeyArena before 2010. In the documents, Sonics' attorneys dispute the city's contention that the team's departure would have a broad and hard-to-quantify impact.

"The financial issue is simple, and the city's analysts agree, there will be no net economic loss if the Sonics leave Seattle. Entertainment dollars not spent on the Sonics will be spent on Seattle's many other sports and entertainment options. Seattleites will not reduce their entertainment budget simply because the Sonics leave," the Sonics said in the court brief.

The Sonics also said they would produce a survey showing that 66 percent of Seattleites say the team's exit would make "no difference" in their lives, while only 12 percent said they'd be "much worse off."

Those sentiments belie what Sonics' boosters — and sports teams in general — have argued when asking for taxpayer help to build a new arena. Teams and their supporters generally portray professional sports as a boon, bringing a city millions in revenue, hundreds of jobs and immeasurable civic pride.

A spokesman for the Sonics' owners declined to comment Thursday on the court filing.

Rodney Fort, a professor of sports management at the University of Michigan, who has criticized the economic-impact claims made by pro-sports teams, called the Sonics' latest argument "the best chuckle" he's had in a long time.

"It would seem that the value of the Sonics is a 'contingent' value — contingent on the purposes of the

Sonics ownership," Fort said in an e-mail. "On the one hand, when the Sonics are trying to get the public to pitch in on a new arena, they are worth tens of millions to the Seattle area. On the other hand, when they are trying to beat their KeyArena lease, they are worth nothing to the Seattle area."

From a standpoint of legal strategy, the Sonics' argument makes perfect sense.

The team wants to convince U.S. District Judge Marsha Pechman that its fight with Seattle is a run-of-the-mill landlord-tenant dispute that can be resolved quickly with a cash payment. The team has asked for a trial beginning on March 24 so the issue could be resolved in time for the NBA to approve relocation to Oklahoma City next season.

The Sonics also asked Pechman to order mediation to force a settlement.

Lawyers for the city say they need more time to gather evidence. They asked for an Oct. 27 trial date and said they'd be willing to participate in mediation if the Sonics agree to consider a renovated KeyArena as an option — something that principal team owner Clay Bennett has ruled out.

Seattle City Attorney Tom Carr said he disagrees with the Sonics' argument that the team has little or no value to the community.

"Don't you wonder what the people in Oklahoma City think about that?" Carr asked, noting that city will vote in March on a \$100 million tax package to spruce up its six-year-old Ford Center and build a practice facility to lure the team. "The impact of having a professional basketball team here is real, which is why Oklahoma City wants the Sonics, and why Seattle does, too."

But the Sonics may be able to rely on other, less-flattering statements from Seattle leaders to buttress the team's case. State and local politicians have been reluctant to support tax subsidies for a renovated KeyArena or a new arena elsewhere. Seattle voters passed an initiative two years ago forbidding city sweetheart deals for pro-sports teams.

In February 2007, Seattle City Councilmember Nick Licata told Sports Illustrated the economic impact of the Sonics leaving would be "near zero."

Now the Sonics are saying the same thing.

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